

Has the decrease in off-farm opportunities changed the aims and ambitions of those seeking a career in the farming industry?

Or has it broadened the horizons for those already in it? We spoke to three people to find out who is learning the greatest lessons.

With the opportunity to reduce bulk somatic cell counts of more than 150,000 cells/ml by 10%, and through improved fertility performance, increase farm profitability by up to £88 per cow, the options for further training appear to be not only vast but also fruitful.

Combine this with the fact that all training (unless it is subject to an examination) is free to producers and their family members and the option of going 'back to school' becomes even more attractive.

Practical farming

Agricultural programmes are constantly evolving to produce the leaders of tomorrow whether they will be in practical farming or the service sector according to Greenmount College's Nigel Hill.



Alan Thompson pursued the academic route and is now 'nine to five'

they are given all the support and information to make the right choice," says Mr Hill. There is no doubt that when horizons

are already working, but wish to gain a formal qualification."

Skills training

NVQ Level 2 and 3 qualifications can be obtained through training one day a week, with the main emphasis being on practical skills training. Specialist qualifications such as DIY artificial insemination and pesticide application are also included.

"And we also offer technical and business training for those who wish to update their skills to keep pace with constantly changing technology. Training programmes are also offered to assist those who wish to farm full time but are limited in their scope for expansion and can only develop the business by diversifying into another enterprise on the farm," says Mr Hill.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) notes that UK farming contributed £5.8 billion to our economy in 2007 (as measured by Gross Value Added at basic prices) and employs over half a million people. At farm level in the UK herd size has seen a drop of 1.3% and the number of full time farmers has fallen by 4.3% since 2007. On a more regional level, in N.Ireland employment



Mark Blelock runs a successful large dairy herd but would still consider part-time study

and that some employed labour or a family partner will be necessary in order to provide a satisfactory lifestyle. That said, there will never be the amount of free time that a nine-to-five job can offer," he says. "But the satisfaction of running your own business is a very important element for many young producers.

"The course at college helped me to recognise some of the challenges that farming will provide in the future and the effort and skills that will be required to meet them," he adds.

Part-time study

He runs a 110-cow herd in partnership with his father and completed a one-year certificate course in agriculture before going home to farm. He has since completed his diploma in agriculture through part-time study.

"And I would still consider further part-time study. Legislation, quality controls and detailed record keeping are constantly changing and this makes it vital to keep up to date in order to meet quality and environmental standards and to allow me to base management decisions on detailed results and their analysis.

Could you benefit from going 'back to school' and learning new and updating existing skills?

On course for a bright future

With business growth programmes designed to improve profitability of the farm business, enhancing the business performance within each situation, combined with a wide range of one day courses - there are more than 150 available from tractor driving to sheep shearing - and with a variety of different entry requirements it appears that there is something to meet everybody's needs.

"Ensuring that young producers are well equipped for the challenges in the industry, whatever pathway they take is our aim. The aim is not to push them towards farming or the ancillary industries; it is merely to ensure that

are broadened during work placement the alternatives to farming at home may look more appealing, and there is always the possibility that young, would-be farmers may change their minds," he adds.

"Agriculture needs well trained and qualified young people, whether they are full- or part-time or work in the related industries. And training is vital to the well being of the industry.

"We provide part-time and day-release courses for those who cannot devote the time to attend a full-time course. Part-time study is ideal for those students who want to start work on the home farm as soon as possible or for those who

opportunities within the agricultural industry sit at 54,000 jobs with a gross output of almost £1.2 billion. According to DARD statistics, since 1997 the number of small farms has decreased by 70% and the number of large farms has increased by 61%, with the average herd size up by 42%. And this begs the question, who is keeping the home fires burning?

With a BSc Hons in Agricultural Technology from Queen's University Belfast, and a full-time position as a nutritionist within a leading animal feed manufacturer, Alan Thompson is a classic example of the new academic young producer that has emerged in the

industry. With the home farm going from a full-time commitment to a part-time one - that he enjoys contributing to at weekends - the option of taking over the family farm was not there for him when he graduated.

Academic route

"The farm needed a massive investment to modernise it to a level that would provide good enough returns for me to have the confidence to take it on full-time. The capital wasn't there to do this, and, in pursuing the academic route I secured a work placement with John Thompson and Sons," he says.

The challenge of utilising feed materials

to best advantage through cost, quality and availability to compile complex rations with specific nutritional benefits attracted me to my current career."

Mr Thompson adds that all of his colleagues at college were in pursuit of academic qualifications and after graduation some secured a job within the agricultural industry, which still allows them the closeness to farm life that they crave. Others, like Mark Blelock, went home to farm armed with a better knowledge of how to develop both their career and their business.

"Those students who are dedicated to the land and decide to farm full time realise that scale of operation is vital

"Greater control is gained by having a vested interest in all the elements that make up the farm business. I have no desire to become a vet, but I want to make sure that I have a heightened understanding of all aspects of cow health and management," he adds.

Like Alan Thompson he notes that his colleagues in related industries have more free time, but he likes the satisfaction of making his own decisions and being control of his own destiny. "And we do have a relief milker so I do get some weekends off!"

Allison Matthews